

THE SNOOPY ORPHAN

by

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I returned from Camp Canada to find Ben's house and family as strange to me as when I had first showed up the previous February, carrying all my possessions in a duffel bag. Over dinner, Mrs. Battle interrogated me—"How many bunks were there per cabin? Did they still tell that story about the ghosts of drowned Indians? Where *are* you hiding your mosquito bites? Oh, dear, I don't envy you the plane ride. They didn't seat you next to an obese American, did they?" Mr. Battle seemed friendly, though most of his attention went toward his *coq au vin*. Ben rocked back on his chair legs, apparently more interested in watching the old man walking his collie through the garden than listening to my stories. He left the table before dessert because there was a TV show he wanted to catch. Imagine if I'd done that!

I couldn't even imagine wanting to. While Jolanta, the Polish maid, cut the crêpe cake, Mrs. Battle began to brim over with her own memories of the Lake. Had the glacier melted due to global warming? Did they still make you go swimming by moonlight? How mean the counselors could be! Yet, somehow, the meanest counsellor was everyone's favorite...

Counselor Jamie had saved me from drowning. At last, I had something interesting to say, but I bit my tongue, realizing I didn't want anyone to ask who Counselor Jamie was.

"Do they still go jumping off the cliffs?" Mrs. Battle asked.

"Oh, yes," I said.

"I only managed it myself on a dare." She shuddered. "How about you? Were you brave?"

"I can't swim," I said, evading the question.

“And they didn’t teach you?” She wore no makeup and didn’t seem to worry that making facial expressions would give her wrinkles. This made her seem much younger than fifty. “What good is summer camp without swimming? We’ll have to get you lessons so that next year you can enjoy yourself properly.”

*Next year.*

Despite myself, I looked at Mr. Battle. He smiled back vaguely.

Even at the first interview, I could tell they were going to be different from my other families. Thinner, obviously, but also more...luminous. Perhaps I was just dazzled by Mrs. Battle’s ring—a real sapphire, I was sure—with a star inside.

Mary held the door for them, bowing extravagantly. Behind their backs, she lifted her clipboard to me in salute.

I was Mary’s pet project. When I’d failed history, quoting a vitriolic and entirely fictional speech by Margaret Thatcher on immigration, Mary had raced over in her orange Fiat and managed to talk the teacher into regarding the passage as satire—not quite what the assignment had asked for, but certainly not *lying*. And when one day I came home to find my host family had moved, and new tenants were carrying a velvet sofa up the stairs, Mary had let me stay in her flat until she could find me a new placement.

Now, she had found me relatives. The connection was too distant to insist on—Mr. Battle was my third cousin, once removed, and had never heard of my existence until Mary showed up on his doorstep, and insisted on it.

“I must warn you,” she told me, “Mr. Battle don’t sound at *all* thrilled, but Mrs. Battle, the Honorable Georgina, as it were, takes quite another view.” It seemed Mrs. Battle had always wanted more children.

Mary took me to Primark for new clothes, giving me the resources to look normal, if I wished, yet I showed up for the interview wearing an Oxfam jacket and trousers that had once, during the Great Depression perhaps, formed part of an expensive suit. My plan was to resemble a decayed leaf off the Battle family tree.

From the way Mrs. Battle looked at me, I guessed that she had been expecting someone younger. I went pigeon-toed and tugged at my left index finger; I seemed to spend half my time trying to appear harmless, the other half causing harm.

“Not many people are interested in taking a fifteen-year-old boy,” Mary said. “They imagine, by that age, it’s a lost cause. They don’t want to turn their home into a *prison*.” She chuckled.

A crease appeared between Mrs. Battle’s blonde eyebrows.

“But with Arthur, it’s a different story,” Mary continued, walking around the back of my chair. “Arthur is *family*.” She clapped her hand on my shoulder.

Mrs. Battle was leafing through my file. She lingered for a moment on my vaccination record, then pulled out the certificate I’d received from the Birmingham City Council: second place, Young Poets Category, 2005.

“You know,” she said, “I’m working part-time on my M.Phil in literature.”

“Congratulations!”

She waved them away.

“Every Monday, I give a presentation for sixth form English at Baverstock School. That’s not where you go, is it?”

“No, I’m at John Willmott.”

Mrs. Battle’s eyes widened.

“You do plan on taking your A-Levels, then?”

“Of course. I’ll transfer next term, hopefully.”

“Yes, I hope so.” She began to discuss her thesis. “Charles and Ben are probably sick of hearing me talk about it. *You* don’t by any chance have an opinion on Sitwell?”

“Oh, *Dame* Edith Sitwell?” I said, thinking I had heard some such cluster of sounds.

“I stand corrected,” she smiled. “I suppose there’s no harm in observing these niceties.”

I was emboldened to carry on as eruditely as I had begun.

“She’s rather excellent, isn’t she? I love her work on *Peter Grimes*. And she died during the Blitz, didn’t she?”

Mrs. Battle laughed.

“I think we’re going to get along just fine.”

Counselor Jamie came from Minnesota. I never teased him about his accent, but he did not return the favor.

“Say it again,” he commanded, conducting the clouds with a grass baton: “‘I’m tebbly soddy about the whole *gharstly* bidness.’”

“That’s a terrible imitation,” I said.

“No, it isn’t.”

He was right, but I didn't mind. Here, there was no stigma for the posh-voiced. Canadians believed that every Brit sounded like Julie Andrews, either as Mary Poppins or Eliza Doolittle.

"What does your 'official reprimand' consist of, anyway, besides a sheet of yellow paper?" I asked.

"Just the paper," he said.

Jamie had taken some of us swimming without life jackets. I'd had a trifling accident and somebody, probably Alicia, had spread it around that I'd almost drowned.

I have a healthy admiration for the things money can buy, so when the Battles walked me to their car, I should have felt more joy and less trepidation. But their poshness was unsettling, being real. I had hoped for a Rolls with a chauffeur named Bates. Instead, I found a grey Mercedes tuned to Radio 4—soothing Welsh voices, discussing domestic violence—and Mr. Battle himself held the door for me, urging me to watch my head.

I let my forehead vibrate against the glass, watching as suburbia gave way to the stuccoed row houses where my last family had lived, then the city centre, then the shady townhouses and plane trees in the neighborhood of St. George's. Mr. Battle made a few sharp turns, and we were rolling up a gravel drive into a private garden with a spiked fence, hydrangeas, pine trees and—strangely narrow in isolation from other buildings—a three story brick house with a slate roof.

Home.

My last guardian Trudy had used to take me to the public pool. She'd leave me with her daughter Crystal in the shallows while she swam up and down the lanes, as fast and spotted as a narwhal. Mostly, I just sat on the steps, but I got to be comfortable in the water.

So when Counselor Jamie offered to take us cliff jumping, it hardly occurred to me that I might not actually know how to swim. Anyway, I'd have gone just for the lunch. Faced with the challenge of portability, the cooks of Camp Canada were inspired: hand-bottled lemonades, mini sandwiches of cheese and fruit, plum-sized pies...

Counselor Zach talked about misogyny in rap, wittily, it seemed, since the others laughed, but the sensations in my mouth left me just enough thought for the simple things: birch branches, blond mustaches, the deerfly settling in the middle of Counselor Jamie's back... I'd been in Canada long enough to know they won't stay dead unless you really smash them.

So I really smashed it.

Jamie smashed back.

"There was a deerfly," I gasped. "I promise!"

"There was one on you, too."

"They don't die unless," I said, but had to stop to catch my breath.

As if to alleviate the tension, Alicia said,

"All this fruit makes me bloat. Maybe we should have eaten *after* swimming?"

"Don't worry, I'm a trained lifeguard," Jamie said.

"Trained where?"

"At a special lifeguard training facility in the United States."

As if to prove it, he took a running jump off the cliff.

"Jamie!" Alicia giggled.

He vanished in a column of bubbles, then surfaced with a whoop. Emitting a tiny scream, Alicia jumped, too, and the others followed closer on her heels than I thought was safe. While they milled around, shaking the water out of their hair, I stood, crumbling the ledge with my toes, trying very hard to remember the dead man's float.

At the Battles', I had more time alone than I'd ever enjoyed before. I used a great deal of it to look through their things.

Mr. Battle's papers were full of erotically large sums. I'd swivel in his leather chair, advising myself not to count the dot-coms out just yet. "But keep your nest egg in railways, young man; nothing declines at a more respectable rate!" One day, pulling at the hood of his desk, I found it locked. I searched inside his collection of oriental urns, behind his books, under his rug, but couldn't find the key.

Mrs. Battle gave me free use of her library, but what I enjoyed most was looking at her Jewels. It was touching how quickly she confided in me. I'd only been with the Battles two weeks when the Hon. Georgina dumped her treasures out on her bed and introduced us:

"Now this sapphire was a gift to my great-grandmother Clara from an Indian prince, the Maharajah of Jaipur. It always makes me think of *The Secret Garden*... She died of scarlet fever when she was thirty-five. Hold it up to the light. *Un saphir étoilé!* Try it on your pinky—you washed your hands, didn't you? There! Just the colour of your eyes. Imagine how tiny her hands must have been... Now *these* opals," she held up a chain of massive orbs, "came from my grandfather Alfred's mines in Australia. Don't be shy; the oil from your skin keeps them from cracking."



Mrs. Battle wasn't gloating. Grandma Clara and Grandpa Alfred were my relations, too, she seemed to imply—a gift almost as precious as the jewels themselves.

Ben locked his room when he was gone. Yet there was a lot, I hoped, one could learn about a person from his *toilette*. Ben had a wider selection of salves and serums than I thought entirely normal for a sixteen-year-old boy, as well as a fancy trimmer whose purpose I couldn't quite determine. Anyway, *I* used it for armpits.

The only things I stole were clearly junk to the Battles: some old coins, hotel soaps with grand names—Lutetia Paris, Sacher Wien—and a bottle of seashells, lacquered so they always looked wet.

I pressed my ear to Ben's door. It sounded like a bunch of fairy blacksmiths at work—a strange sort of piano music. When I knocked, Ben grunted and I took this as permission to come in.

He was lying with his hands under one cheek, watching me with a bracing mixture of hatred and ennui. Fortunately, I'd convinced myself this was how he looked at everyone.

I sat by him until I felt my presence had been accepted and he turned off the music and said,

“What are you doing here, then?”

“It's your mum,” I said, improvising.

He raised his eyebrows.

“She's worried about your emotional health. She sent me to find out if everything is OK.”

“Oh, great.” He rolled over.

In fact, Mrs. Battle had merely remarked, as we chopped bits for *salade niçoise*,

“I wish Ben didn’t spend so much time in his room. I’m beginning to forget what he looks like.”

Feeling like the favorite son, I volunteered, “Do you want me to go get him?”

“Be my guest,” she said. “But be sure to knock first.”

Knock first? What might I not be interrupting! Yet I hadn’t bargained on anything quite as intimate as this Scarlatti séance.

“Listen,” Ben commanded, starting the track over for the fifth time. “Isn’t that marvelous? You’ll hear the ‘hunting call’ motif again in a moment, only upside down.” He scrutinised my face. “You didn’t hear it? Never mind; we’ll try again.”

And we tried again, and again.

After jumping into the water, I quickly found myself much deeper than I’d expected. My heel hit a rock. I let out a blurb of air, which disintegrated into shells. I’d never opened my eyes underwater before, and a fragment of my mind found time to be surprised it didn’t hurt. When Jamie grabbed me, I went limp in order not to struggle, and somehow this turned into the game of me pretending to be unconscious.

He dragged me onto the grass.

“Oh my Gosh!” someone said.

“What happened?”

“Keep back.”

“Did he drown?”

Beneath my eyelids, I rolled my eyes.

“Does he need CPR?” Zach asked.

“Don’t sound so eager,” Jamie said. “He’s breathing just fine. In fact,” I felt him leaning over me, “I’d say he’s trying not to smile.”

I coughed to keep myself from grinning.

“I think I hit my head...” I said.

“Your head looks fine to me. It’s your foot I’d be worried about.”

I felt a pricking along my heel.

“Don’t just put it back on!” Alicia squealed.

“What, you want me to tear it off?”

At this, I managed to sit up. My heel had been cleanly but shallowly shelled. The sight of it made me genuinely swoon.

“Just lie down,” Jamie said. “Catch your breath, then we’ll walk you back to camp.”

“I’d better take him,” Zach said.

“It’s OK. You stay with the others. No reason to spoil everyone’s afternoon.”

Far from spoiling it, I knew I had provided its main source of fun. For once, though, I felt tired of being looked at.

“I’m ready to go,” I said.

Jamie slung my arm around his neck and lifted me up.

“Can you hobble?” he said.

“I’m not sure I’ve ever tried.”

I dipped my heel into the mixture of sand and pine needles covering the ground.

“Just hop on one foot,” Jamie said. “Don’t be afraid to put your weight on me.”

Slowly, we perfected our three-legged walk. It was a beautiful day to be in the forest. The birds were singing. Or, if they weren’t, they should have been.

“You just need a butterfly bandage, I’m guessing,” Jamie said. “I could put it on you myself. But if you’re afraid of scarring, we can probably get you stitches.”

“Who would do the stitches?” I asked cautiously.

“Debra”—the camp nurse.

“A butterfly bandage sounds nicer.”

I leaned my head against his neck. His arm tightened around my waist.

Mrs. Battle read aloud, pacing back and forth with a mechanical pencil in her hand:

*“Bound to my heart as Ixion to the wheel, / Nailed to my heart as the Thief upon the Cross...* Hmm, I’m not sure about this, Dame Sitwell. Aren’t you mixing your mythologies? What do you think, Arthur?”

We were in Mrs. Battle’s study. Snowflakes puffed against the windows and the sofa felt as soft as flour under my cheek.

“Remind me, who is this Ixion?” I said.

“Oh, a sort of classical Cain. You know the story of Cain and Abel?”

“One of my favorites!”

“*Well*, after Ixion killed his father-in-law, and was ostracized by men, Zeus invited him to live with the gods.”

“I’m guessing that turned out well.”

“Ixion fell in love with Hera—which was far more offensive than inventing murder—and I suppose he’s been on the wheel ever since. Excluding, of course, a brief but memorable stint as a bull, fathering the race of centaurs.”

*“Une très bonne histoire!”*

Mrs. Battle stopped pacing:

“I’ve been meaning to ask: do you really know French, or are you just being pretentious?”

I panicked a little, then realized forthrightness might suffice.

“Pretentious,” I said. “Yes, I was just being pretentious.”

“Well, perhaps pretense is the first step toward knowledge.”

*“Fais semblant, et le reste suivra—n’est-ce pas?”* I said.

She laughed, surprised, and scribbled something in her book.

Our bus idled in front of the lodge. Alicia had run back for the iPod she’d been showing off all summer. The drive to the airport was going to take six hours. I settled my head against the glass. The vibration, I’d heard, was good for the brain.

The counsellors would be staying a few extra days to put things away. I watched Zach and Jamie hauling a kayak across the lawn. Jamie stumbled but recovered his footing with a quick little jig.

We’d said goodbye that morning while walking along the shore. It was cold, and we’d kept our hands in our pockets and kicked a lot of stones. Jamie said he was taking this job again next summer, but I had to admit I probably wasn’t coming back. It was too early, I knew, to hope the Battles would keep me.

Jamie seemed to find my situation hard to understand.

“They’re your relatives, aren’t they?”

“Only if they want to be.”

“Hmm. My idea of family was that you’re stuck together even if you don’t.”

Before we got back within sight of camp, he kissed me on the forehead in a way that struck me as brotherly, though on second thought, probably wasn't.

Alicia climbed aboard, apologizing noisily, and we pulled away. I twisted around to look out the back window. From this distance, the lake looked like a field of grass, rippling in the wind.

One day in the middle of November, I happened to be standing near the door of Mr. Battle's study when I heard my name.

"Including summer camp, French lessons, swimming lessons, Arthur's turning out to be an even bigger drain than Ben."

"Darling, when I consider how much you spent on your latest Ming vase..." Mrs. Battle said.

"Well, I get more pleasure from it."

"You're so selfish!" she said affectionately. "Think of it as an investment, then, which Arthur will repay with loving kindness in your old age."

"I'm looking forward to it," he said.

I began to edge away from the door but Mr. Battle went on, "There's one more thing..."

"Yes?"

"My Philip of Macedon coins—the bunch from last Christmas that I haven't had mounted yet—have you seen them?"

Mrs. Battle laughed.

"By your tone, I was worried it was going to be something serious!" she said.

"They were in a jar on my dresser. I'm absolutely certain where I left them."

“Oh,” she said more quietly. “It’s rather like *Anne of Green Gables*, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“I mean, you’d better check underneath your dresser before you start making accusations. Perhaps Jolanta knocked them off while dusting—”

“I must say, the idea of Jolanta dusting strikes me as pretty far-fetched. Besides, it wasn’t her I had in mind.”

“Well, I’ll ask him. I’ll ask Ben, too,” she added. “I’m sure there will be a reasonable explanation. Just look,” she said, as if on the same subject, “how much Ben has blossomed, taking a brother under his wing!”

“I’m not sure I can bear much more blossoming.”

“How do you mean?”

“Nothing”—he seemed embarrassed. “Only I wish Ben would make more friends of his own sort.”

“Rich kids?”

“Well, people he doesn’t have to *patronize*. He seems to regard Arthur as his gentleman’s personal gentleman.”

Ben had granted me a sort of dogsbody intimacy. I was allowed to run errands for him, make him snacks, give him back rubs. I could even join him for music hour, as long as I didn’t speak. And on the rare occasions when he had friends over, I was sometimes requested to make up a quartet for a game of *Mortal Combat Evolved*.

“No, you fool!” Ben said as I accidentally threw a plasma grenade into the path of our own jeep. Raj and Lance, submerged in the beanbag on either side of us, tittered as my quarter of

the screen swirled to black—rather a picturesque effect in combination with the eddies of computer-generated snow and blood.

*“Picturesque?”* Raj said. “You’re a funny fellow, Arthur, you know that?”

He took the flag off my corpse and won the game with it.

“Once more,” Ben said. “This time Arthur’s got it.”

“We could shuffle teams,” Lance suggested.

“No, no—I wouldn’t want to sabotage you guys.”

It was wonderful being one of the guys.

After overhearing Mr. Battle’s accusation, I fumed for about an hour before realizing that I actually had stolen his coins. I’d assumed the misshapen little things were just spare change from a trip to some backward country. I agonized all afternoon over whether to tell Mrs. Battle about them, and admit my habit of rummaging, or simply replace them.

In the end—and I can only say it seemed like a good idea at the time—I decided to plant them underneath his dresser, rolled up against the wall. After all, that was exactly where Mrs. Battle had suggested he look.

At my last place, eavesdropping had been unavoidable, really, through the pasteboard walls. At the Battles’, however, it required skill. You had to know which boards creaked, which doors squeaked, which pictures were interesting enough to provide an alibi if a door suddenly opened and you were discovered standing there, looking.

I was in place outside Mr. Battle’s study when he addressed his wife:

“Did you have a chance to speak to Arthur yet?”



“Not quite. I thought maybe tomorrow, on the way to French.”

“Well, I found the coins.”

“Oh, good! Where were they?”

“Under my dresser.”

“There, you see?”

“The thing is, they weren’t there yesterday.”

Beginning to realize my mistake, I pictured them turning simultaneously toward the door. I edged away, but they carried on talking, quite loudly—almost as if they intended me to hear.

“I’ve ignored it as long as possible,” Mr. Battle said. “But I have to lock my desk, you know. Not long after he arrived, I found my papers completely out of order. Financial documents included.”

“Anything missing?” Mrs. Battle asked briskly.

“Not that I’m aware of. That’s why I haven’t made a point of it... It’s understandable, when you consider the upbringing he’s had. But we couldn’t keep him in the *house*.”

He spoke soothingly, but Mrs. Battle replied with impatience:

“Well, he goes through my jewels and clothes and old letters and probably everything else in the house when we aren’t looking. But that’s the price you pay when you let someone like him into a place like this. We agreed to regard Arthur as family, and a family doesn’t, a family couldn’t...”

Mrs. Battle apparently couldn’t think what it was a family couldn’t do. Neither could I.

“If I remember correctly, I agreed to regard him as a third cousin, once removed,” Mr. Battle said. “Georgie, dear,”—was she crying?—“I don’t mean to abandon the boy. We just need a change of plan.” There was the sound of a chair being drawn back.

“Perhaps you’re right,” she said in a muffled voice.

I retreated, the floorboards less trustworthy than ever. I knocked into an ancestral portrait and grabbed its frame to stop it swinging.

“I’m so clumsy, you have no idea!” I apologized.

I ran to my bedroom and breathed into my pillow for a while. Then I made sure that my hotel soaps and seashells were still in their shoebox under the bed. Who knew? Perhaps they, too, were valuable.

Suddenly, everything seemed valuable, and none of it seemed like mine. I sat in the middle of the bed, feeling as if I were going to be late for an international flight, until I heard a sarabande, or possibly an allemande, playing on the other side of the wall. I entered Ben’s room without knocking.

He was lying on his stomach and didn’t acknowledge my presence even when I began to give him a back rub. I rolled his t-shirt up as I went, an inch at a time. This was not according to routine and I felt him shift from unintentionally to intentionally ignoring me. I didn’t want to be ignored, so I kissed the center of his spine and waited. It took a few seconds for him to decide how to react.

He rolled over, pushing me off.

“Get out,” he said. “I don’t ever want to see you in here again.”

“OK,” I said, and left.

“We’re very lucky to get you in on such short notice,” Mrs. Battle said. “It’s one of the best schools in the country. Charles’ younger brother went there as a boy.”

January had begun to thaw, and the trees looked as if their leaves had been torched, not frozen, off. Mrs. Battle's manner was tense. Her hair was in a bun.

"So why didn't you send Ben?" I said.

She smiled briefly.

"Boarding school isn't for everybody. But it'll be the best thing in the world for you. French, music—anything you want. You've been wasted up to this point."

"Could I visit you on holidays?" I asked.

She paused.

"Of course. We've already reserved a place for you at Camp Canada next summer, but perhaps you can spend Christmas here... Yes, I think I can promise you Christmas."

"And what about when I go to university?"

"You're sure to get a scholarship and can go where you please."

"I mean, will I still be able to come back here?"

"Arthur,"—she turned away from the window—"you've been a friend to me, and I'll always be glad to see you." I turned away to hide my disappointment. "But the question of who can visit here and when isn't entirely up to me. If my husband *and* my son are against it..." She sat by me. "Really, this house hasn't been as pleasant for you as we'd hoped, has it?"

"I *would* like to come back for Christmas," I said. "If you can manage it."

Mrs. Battle took my hand.

"I'm honestly amazed, my dear, how much you've managed to offend them. Us." She laughed. "What we let ourselves in for! You're essentially a juvenile delinquent, you know. I was fully aware of that when I picked you up, like a pup from the pound. But I thought because you had brains..."

She let go of my hand and looked out the window.

I wanted to explain about the coins, but what was there to say? That I wouldn't have stolen them if I'd thought they were valuable? That she could trust me in the future?

Besides, I couldn't refute whatever Ben had charged me with. I'd wanted more than her money, more even than her friendship. I'd wanted her home, her family, and when she died—if only to brighten that sad day—her jewels, with all the stars inside.